

"Get Your Head Around Classification!"



By Wendy Ross – Paralympic Program Development Officer – Swimming Australia

Firstly do you have a swimmer in your squad with a disability?

If your answer is yes, then you are possibly one of a small number who has an understanding of classification. Many coaches, aquatic teachers, coordinators, parents & the general public are either, unaware of what classification is in disability swimming or they do not have an accurate understanding of this important component, that makes up the basis of competition for swimmers with a disability.

The classification process provides opportunity to swimmers with a disability to compete in a fair & structured competition. Athletes are placed into groups of comparable ability, function & disability groupings. The deaf, vision, transplant & athletes with an intellectual disability are placed in accordance to their area of disability.

As a coach, you understand that there are many components that go into the makings of an elite swimmer. These variables include several attributes such as arm span, body shape, height etc & we all are aware that coaching procedures & training protocol are major factors. However there are still at times, misconceptions on classification & it also brings up a lot of controversy around pool deck. This may be due from a misunderstanding of the classification procedure & or the lack of knowledge of this process.

Understanding Classification is easy with a little education, so let's take a look at this process.

Functional Classification

This process of classification is where athletes who have physical disabilities are placed into a particular group, known as a class. In the functional classification system there are 10 classes. The range of the classes start at 1 with these swimmers having the **least functional ability** to class 10 athletes who have **minimal disability** or the most functional ability. Within in each class there are a wide range of disabilities.

These functional disabilities include;

- **Amputees**, including **Dysmelia** which can be explained as malformation of limb or limbs as a result of disturbances in the embryonic development & can include excessive development as well as reduction.
- **Cerebral palsy** which is a non progressive disorder that affects posture & movement due to damage to an area or areas of the brain that control & coordinate reflexes, posture, movement & muscle tone. **Head injured** is also included.
- **Spinal cord injury** (damage to the spinal cord caused by trauma) & **Spinal Cord Disorder** (damage of the spinal cord due to congenital malformation, disease or surgery. **Polio** is also included.
- **Les Autres** (is a French term meaning "the others") eg **Achondroplasia** which is a hereditary defect causing growth reduction ie: Short Stature, **Arthrogyrosis** which can be explained as a congenital immobility of joints with limited movement or stiffness of one or more extremities, with lack of muscle development & growth & **Multiple Sclerosis** which is a chronic disease, progressive which affects the nerves in the brain & spinal cord.
- **Any Locomotor Disability** – eg **Arthritis** which is inflammation of joints.

There are disabilities that are not included in this system of functional classification & these include; transplants, deaf, visual impairment, epilepsy, developmental delay, intellectual disability & learning difficulty, diabetes & awkward children.

Functional Classification Process

The Functional Classification process has 3 components, the Bench Test, the Water Test & Observation & Confirmation of the class in competition.

The Bench Test

This test is performed by a “**trained medical classifier**” whose background profession is either a physiotherapist or a medical doctor.

The medical classifier conducts several tests on the swimmer such as muscle strength testing, co-ordination testing, range of movement in joint mobility, body height measurements & measurement & calculation of amputated or dysmelic limb.

The medical classifier issues a point scale on the tests completed by the swimmer. Points are allocated by the classifier, through the classification manual issued to the trained classifier.

For a swimmer to be eligible to compete in a functional class, the swimmer is required to lose a minimum number of 15 points on the Bench Test. The Bench test is the key to determining eligibility.

The Water Test

This test is performed by a “**trained technical classifier**” whose background profession is an accredited Swimming Coach or a recognised accredited swim coach/trainer.

The Technical Classifier conducts several tests in a pool water environment.

These tests include; swimmers actual race start (freestyle, breaststroke & butterfly), all 4 strokes of freestyle, backstroke, breaststroke & butterfly, front & back floats, with & without kick, & backstroke start.

The technical classifier observes the swimmer transferring from a chair or walking on deck etc. Distances of the strokes asked by the classifier to be travelled, may vary with individual swimmers & a classifier may ask the swimmer to perform a particular stroke drill.

It is important that the classifier is conversant with the swimming rules & observe the swimmer for a sufficient amount of time appropriate to assess the swimmer correctly.

Competition Observation

Both the medical & technical classifier observes the swimmer during competition.

All three components of functional classification testing must be completed satisfactory for the classifiers to assign a class to the swimmer.

Swimmers who fit in the functional classification system (FCS) & are classified at a young age (eg. Under 17 years) may be reviewed & assessed when the swimmer reaches maturity. However this will be dependant upon the disability of the swimmer.

Classification of Visual Disability

The classes for these swimmers range from class 11 being a swimmer with a **high degree of visual impairment** to class 13, for swimmers with **minimum visual disability**.

Blind & visually impaired athletes have a classification process that uses a medical based approach. This process involves testing eyesight by professional specialists within this medical field. On completion of specialist eye testing, the swimmer forwards this information + registration information to Blind Sports Australia, for eligibility criteria.

Intellectual Disability Classification

Swimmers in this disability category are a class 14. They must first fit the requirements of eligibility in regards to IQ & Adaptive behaviour as expressed in conceptual, social & practical adaptive skills.

Like the Visual impaired, swimmers in this disability are required to be tested by field specialists, again taking a medical approach. The organisation Ausrapid – Australian Sport & Recreation Association for Persons with an Intellectual Disability has eligibility criteria for swimmers with an intellectual disability for elite competition, nationally based as well as International INAS-FID world events. Special Olympics Australia also has a membership base for Class S14.

Classification of Deaf & Hearing Impairment

Class 15 is given to swimmers who compete in this disability category. Again a medical approach is undertaken with field specialists performing the "loss of hearing" tests. Eligibility criteria can be obtained through Swimming Australia and Australian Deaf Sports Federation (ADSF). Other relevant information can be found on the ADSF website.

Transplant Classification

Transplant recipients of organ or bone transplant; hold a class 16 classification, once all medical reports and eligibility criteria have been completed and submitted to Swimming Australia. Up coming elite events such as Transplant Games, can be obtained via the Australian Transplant Sports Association website.

Connecting Classification to "The Swimming Strokes"

To match the swimming strokes with the class the;

Prefix S is given to the strokes of **Freestyle, Backstroke & Butterfly.**

Prefix SB is given to **Breaststroke** and,

Prefix SM is given to **Individual Medley (IM)**

All swimmers receive a class for all strokes, as per classifier or medical guidelines.

All Classes once classified must apply to **Swimming Australia** for an **Athlete Identification Card**. This form can be downloaded from the Swimming Australia website or contact the office on 02 6219 5600.

On this identification card, (which is to be shown to the referee at every swim meet) lists all rule exemptions for a swimmer - if rule exceptions are applicable to that swimmer & class.

For example;

- It is compulsory for a Swimmer whose class is S11 SB11 & SM11 (visually impaired) to have a tapper. A tapper is a person who indicates to the swimmer via a tapping device when the swimmer is to turn and finish. It is also compulsory for a S11 SB11 & SM11 to have blackened goggles that are inspected by the referees prior to competition.
- A Swimmer may possibly have an In Water or Feet Start as an exception on their identification card. Or a swimmer may need an assisted start.
- An S15 deaf swimmer may have a light or signal required at the start of a race on their ID card.

What ever rule exception a swimmer has, each exception to each stroke, as well as for start & finishes will be on the Athlete ID Card.

Before getting into the classification debate we must always remember that every Swimmer with a Disability is unique, and boasts many qualities, whether the swimmer is an elite athlete or on a participation level. Today with an important focus on classification, for a Swimmer with a Disability to compete, one asks will there ever be a perfect classification system?

For more information on the **Paralympic Preparation Program** – Swimming Australia email: Melanie Jenkins – Paralympic Program Coordinator - melanie.jenkins@swimming.org.au or Wendy Ross – Paralympic Program Development Officer – wendy.ross@swimming.org.au

For classification information, contact your State Swimming Association in your state.

Website References.

Australian Paralympic Committee – www.paralympic.org.au

International Paralympic Committee – www.paralympic.org

Ausrapid – www.ausrapid.org.au

Australian Blind Sports Association – please email - absf@ecn.net.au

Special Olympics Australia – www.specialolympics.com.au

Australian Deaf Sports Federation – www.deafsports.org.au

Australian Transplant Sports Australia – www.transplant.org.au

Disability Sport Australian Sports Commission – www.ausport.gov.au